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What's the Potential for Conflict with China, and How Can It Be Avoided?

Over the next 20 years, China's gross domestic product and defense budget could exceed those of the United States, making it a true peer competitor. Despite this potential, China's security interests and military capabilities will remain focused on its immediate periphery. China does not appear interested in matching U.S. military expenditures, achieving a comparable global reach, or assuming defense commitments beyond its immediate sphere. As a result, armed conflict between the United States and China is unlikely.

Chinese Regional Capabilities

Although China's overall military capabilities will not equal those of the United States any time soon, it will more quickly achieve local superiority, first in and around Taiwan and then at somewhat greater distances. Consequently, the direct defense of contested assets in that region will become progressively more difficult, eventually approaching impossible. Relations between China and Taiwan have improved, but the core issue of the island's ultimate status—-independent or part of a unified China—remains unresolved. The chance of a cross-strait conflict will persist so long as this fundamental disagreement exists. A conflict could take many forms, from blockade to outright invasion.

Should the United States get involved, it would want to preclude conquest of Taiwan and limit damage. Direct defense is presently feasible. Precluding the Chinese from dominating the air or sea and limiting the damage from land attack missiles, perhaps by mainland strikes, would be core missions. Chinese military modernization programs will erode U.S. ability to accomplish these missions. Over time, China will be able to expand and extend its anti-access capabilities. In addition, Chinese cyber and anti-satellite capabilities may eventually be able to disrupt U.S. command, control, and intelligence capabilities,

Key Points

- Even as China becomes a near peer competitor, armed conflict between China and the United States will be unlikely.
- To ensure this, the United States must retain its deterrent capacity and bolster the capabilities and resolve of other regional states.
- Should conflict with China occur, the economic consequences would be historically unparalleled.
- A collapse of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is the most likely East Asia contingency, and U.S. ground forces will be essential to address it.

which, given U.S. dependence on them, could make direct defense far more difficult.

Managing Escalation and Retaliation

The United States will therefore increasingly depend on escalatory options for defense and retaliatory capabilities for deterrence. U.S. nuclear superiority is not likely to help in this regard, both because China will retain a second-strike capability and because the issues at stake in most potential crises are not of vital consequence to the United States.

The possibility of escalation is high. Armed conflict with China would be likely to escalate into the cyber and economic realms. In both cases, U.S. vulnerabilities are such as to make this eventuality unattractively costly. Conventional strikes on mainland Chinese military targets may be the best escalatory option, but there is little reason to be confident that conflict could be so confined.

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A U.S.-China conflict might also break out in—and perhaps be confined to—cyberspace. Cyber war might be an overture to armed hostilities, or the conflict could remain there. Escalation within cyberspace could take the form of efforts to penetrate sensitive networks such as intelligence. If warning networks were breached, the United States might retaliate against networks that affect Chinese trade, which could lead to escalatory attacks such as “soft kill” of satellites.

Using Coalitions and Cooperation

While armed conflict between the United States and China is not probable, that judgment assumes that the United States will retain the capacity to deter behavior that would lead to a clash. The United States should also enable the capabilities and buttress the resolve of China’s neighbors. Such a strategy should not be—or be seen—as a U.S. attempt to encircle or align the region against China, lest it provoke greater Chinese hostility. A parallel effort should be made to draw China into cooperative security endeavors, not only to avoid the appearance of an anti-China coalition but also to obtain greater contributions to international security from the world’s second-strongest power.

Should a Sino-American conflict occur, the economic consequences could be historically unparalleled, even if both sides avoid economic warfare. This is a powerful mutual deterrent, one that tilts marginally in U.S. favor at present. Strengthening the U.S. economy is the best way of ensuring

that the balance of interdependence and of the associated deterrence does not shift dangerously against the United States over the next several decades.

Other Potential Conflicts in East Asia

Conflicts in the region involving nations other than China are more likely. Possible conflicts might arise on its periphery involving Korea, Taiwan, one or more countries of Southeast Asia, or India, roughly in that descending order of probability. These more likely conflicts will be with opponents quite different from China and will call for capabilities quite dissimilar from those required to deal with a real peer competitor. Individually, these contingencies will be less consequential than a conflict with China, but collectively they will shape the international environment in which both countries interact and fundamentally influence Chinese perceptions of U.S. power and resolve.

U.S. ground forces will be essential for the most likely East Asia contingency, that arising from a collapse of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), but less so for the others. Collapse of the DPRK would require substantial U.S. ground forces, with a primary goal of securing ballistic missile launch and weapons of mass destruction sites. The possibility of confrontations between U.S. and Chinese forces would be high, and any confrontations would carry with them significant potential for escalation. ■

This research brief describes work done by the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence*, by James Dobbins, David C. Gompert, David A. Shlapak, and Andrew Scobell, OP-344-A, 2011 (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP344.html). This research brief was written by Jerry Sollinger. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND®** is a registered trademark.

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